

Push for Change rolling toward Nepean

 ottawacommunitynews.com/news-story/6837401-push-for-change-rolling-toward-nepean/

Somewhere in Quebec, there's a man pushing a shopping cart.

At a walking pace, he's closing the distance between himself and Ottawa. It's only one stop out of many he'll make as he attempts to cross Canada on foot, but each day he narrows the gap a little more.

Joe Roberts is the man behind the Push for Change campaign, which aims to prevent, reduce and end youth homelessness, and on Sept. 29, he'll push his cause – and his cart – into Nepean. There, Kiwanis Club of Nepean president Gord Clark says he'll be welcomed with a 3:30 p.m. youth rally at Centrepointe Theatre organized by the Kiwanis Club.

"We were quite impressed by (the campaign) so we decided we'd make an effort to be the host for him when he comes," Clark said. "They were looking for people to kind of co-ordinate things in Ottawa, so we decided we'd step in and do it."

The event is free to attend and open to the public. Attendees can pick up tickets at Centrepointe Theatre, 101 Centrepointe Dr., as they arrive that day.

Roberts is expected to speak at the rally, where Bay Coun. Mark Taylor will issue a civic proclamation declaring Joe Roberts Push for Change Day in Ottawa. Between speeches, including by representatives of various local youth organizations who are raising funds for the Push for Change, Clark said singers from the Kiwanis Music Festival and Ottawa's Spirit of the Streets youth choir will perform. Including a free barbecue after presentations, the event is expected to run until 5:30 p.m.

Kiwanis International's mandate is to serve children, so Gordon said the Push for Change campaign especially resonated with the Nepean club's members.

The fact that Roberts, who was homeless in his youth, was able to turn his life around and become a voice for vulnerable youth and the institutions that exist to serve them made the cause that much more appealing to them.

"We're very focused on the youth of the community, and he just seemed to be a kind of catalyst to get the thing going," Gordon said. "He's a very dynamic, very inspiring person."

Roberts began his walk on May 1 in St. John's, N.L., and hopes to reach Vancouver by Sept. 30, 2017.

Accompanied by his wife Marie and a driver who follows him in an RV, Roberts plans to travel over 9,000 kilometres through 10 provinces, with visits to three territories. Everywhere he goes, his shopping cart – a symbol of chronic homelessness in North America – goes as well.

For Roberts, stemming the flow of youth homelessness is about more than just being magnanimous. Roberts, who grew up in Barrie, Ont., fell into a cycle of homelessness at a young age. By 15 years of age he had left his family home and faced housing insecurity. Not long after, he moved to Vancouver where he says he became chronically homeless and addicted to drugs and alcohol.

His salvation from the streets came when he began to tackle his substance abuse in earnest.

"I got clean and sober," Roberts said. "So my entrance into homelessness and my exit out of homelessness had to do with substance abuse."

Roberts entered drug and alcohol treatment in 1991, and by 1999 had recovered and gained success as an

entrepreneur in Vancouver's tech industry.

He earned his first million dollars by age 35, and was named one of Business in Vancouver's 40 under 40 outstanding business people and one of Maclean's magazine's 10 Canadians who make a difference.

"I was fairly successful in the business community," he said. "And I began speaking in the school system. Since then, I've spoken to about 400,000 young people."

Roberts' mission as he makes his way from Canada's east coast to its west coast is twofold. He hopes to raise \$18 million for the Upstream Project, which tackles the root sources of youth housing insecurity.

"We know that for every young person who's ever found themselves on the street, they were sitting in a classroom before that happened," he said, adding that school staff are usually aware that something is wrong, but may not be equipped to fix it.

"Unfortunately a lot of school boards don't have access to adequate resources to give these kids what they need to succeed. The Upstream Project is a model that collaboratively connects these resources and identifies a young person at risk before they leave school."

But Roberts says his most important contribution will come from sparking a conversation across Canada about youth homelessness as he travels from city to city meeting with politicians and speaking to crowds.

"Front line agencies do not have a capacity for public engagement," he said. "So our contribution, dollars aside, the most valuable thing that we're bringing is heightened awareness."

And he said community organizations, like the Kiwanis Club of Nepean, which help bring attention to the cause, are just as instrumental in reducing youth homelessness as the campaign itself.

"For us at the Push for Change, most of what we do is irrelevant without our community campaigns. If we don't have those people to meet us it's a lot of empty kilometres out there. Those are the people that keep my feet moving when it's cold, when it's rainy, when it's snowing."

Roberts expects to reach Ottawa by Sept. 24. Between Sept. 24 and 29, he has engagements scheduled across the city in partnership with the Kiwanis Club of Orléans, Recovery Day Ottawa, NAV Canada, Immaculata High School, and A Way Home Ottawa.

For more information about Push for Change and Robertson's scheduled appearances in Ottawa, visit thepushforchange.com.